

A Place Like Home

by Cat Kane

Much as he prayed, dawn broke inevitably over the dark crags of the mountains. He stayed until the last sparkly pinprick of starshine had been burnt from the wide sky. Sunlight spilt through the peaks, flooded the valley much as whatever river had once carved out this water plain.

In Zack Sheridan's selective memory there weren't enough stars in the heavens as there had been times he'd ridden this valley, galloped over the lush green slopes of the meadows. On Monroe first, when he'd been so young his feet hadn't quite reached the stirrups. And later, when the elderly piebald mare had pined herself away after his Daddy's death, the first horse that had been completely his. He and Rafferty had both grown up out on those hills, though to this day he suspected the stallion had grown up wiser.

They ought to have left the land to the horse. At least Rafferty wouldn't have screwed up this badly.

Last time he'd seen the bay stallion, Rafferty had been kicking the shit out of the local horse dealer's trailer. Stomping and snorting up a fuss, telling Zack in as plainly a way as the animal knew how, that he didn't want to leave. But he'd turned and walked away, the neighing and the kicking still ringing in his ears.

It came down to some kind of shit, he decided, when he was too ashamed to look his old horse in the eyes. Wherever he ended up, he hoped the stallion was somewhere he could still run, still feel the sweet grass beneath his hooves and the glass-clear air running through his mane.

As for him, he had nowhere to go.

The auction for the sale of the house was scheduled for later that morning, but Zack declined the Realtor's invitation to attend. Everyone who had seen the property said the same thing; the house wasn't worth saving. Better bulldoze the lot and build something new, something fancier. That those walls had seen him right for twenty-five years didn't seem to hold much sway as far as they were concerned.

And maybe it shouldn't have. Couldn't be too right if he'd managed to lose it.

But with the money any prospective buyer needed to plough in to bring the place up to scratch, it wouldn't fetch as much as it could have. The land was a different story, even if it remained in the same book. No-one wanted to buy it to keep cattle or raise horses, they wanted it to develop houses and vacation properties. One suit had even come to inspect the place armed with blueprints and schematics of a luxury spa resort.

It might have been different if the majority of the money wasn't going straight to banks and credit companies, and all the others to whom he was in debt over his ears. Some of

the debts were old enough to have been his father's fault, but most of them were Zack's own, and he'd done little to lessen any of them.

The land didn't pay. It was a vacuum that sucked in twice the money he brought in. There was nothing here that broke even; not the livestock, not the horses, nothing. Zack knew he'd been living a dying sort of life, but he would forever have to bear the knowledge that he was the one who'd driven in that final nail.

At least there'd be a little left over. Enough that he wouldn't be entirely homeless, enough that he wouldn't quite starve. At least not until he blew what little he did have. And then he didn't have the first idea what he'd do.

There was nothing he knew how to do, besides this.

And there was nothing he knew how to do in that moment, besides stand on the sloping hillside for the last few minutes that this beautiful wild land remained his, and watch as in the distance, expensive cars drove into the farmhouse's front yard.

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Evan Hunter wasn't a reckless man.

Last time he'd taken a blind chance had been eight years ago. Some backwoods breeder down in Texas had a chestnut mare of no-name blood for sale. Evan debated for two weeks before agreeing to the purchase, and he'd worried about the deal for the next three months before her first race.

When she'd won that race -- and the subsequent five -- he finally chalked it up as a good idea.

So far, he'd only seen the ranch's living room, but he doubted this chance was going to turn out as positively.

The place wasn't a wreck, but it was certainly vying for the deputy position. The wood floors betrayed the years of boots that had trodden a path around the discoloured patterns where furniture had once stood. The fixtures and fittings that had come with the sale consisted of gingham and chintz that Evan hadn't believed existed in reality, except maybe in the dusty annals of The Waltons' prop room.

Someone had actually lived here. Until very recently, according to the Realtor. He couldn't imagine it, in this dark place, too much wood and stone, and a heaviness that wasn't all down to the low beamed ceiling. A glance out of almost every window showed the mountain ranges looming in the distance like ragged grey spikes. It might have looked like wide open spaces, but there was something claustrophobic at the thought of being hemmed in on all sides.

It was nothing like the place where he'd grown up, tinder dry flatlands and skies big enough to hang another moon. He supposed that might have been the allure.

His daddy was three times State Rodeo Champion, with enough buckles to melt down and rival Fort Knox, till his momma had dug her heels in when Evan had been about three. No-one argued with that woman, and his daddy was no different, settling down on their Texas ranch to breed horses and do a little investing in the land on the side. Herb Hunter had always wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, but Evan wanted something more glamorous than chaps and dust and rope. He preferred the sleek lines of the thoroughbreds to the power of the mustangs and quarter horses.

At six one, he was never going to be a jockey. But the love of horses was in his blood, and the past fifteen years had seen him rise to the pinnacle of his profession, becoming one of the most successful trainers on the circuit. The last few years he'd been in Europe, but the call of home had never been far away.

He couldn't go back to Texas. There were more ghosts there than in this old house, so he'd looked around for somewhere more remote. It didn't get much better than this empty corner of south west Wyoming, somewhere no-one knew him. Here the horse was just another part of the ranch staff, not something to watch through binoculars over a glass of chilled champagne.

So what if he was finally settling down and doing what his Daddy reckoned he ought to, four years after they'd quit speaking to each other by mutual consent? He wasn't doing this for anyone but himself.

The land was perfect. Dry sagebrush dotted with tiny oases of willows, poplars and cottonwoods, the majority of the ranch land was on the valley floor, only a few pastures sloping into the foothills. Still, he hadn't planned on a house that needed quite this much work.

He'd just had a hunch. He didn't get them often, and this just went to show he really shouldn't act on them.

"Is everything to your liking, Mr. Hunter?"

"Fine." Evan turned to the Realtor with a practised smile, bright as a west Texas summer sky. "I can already see how I'd like the renovations to go."

"That's wonderful." The Realtor smiled, pleased. "I'm sure you'll be very happy with your new acquisition, Mr. Hunter."

He followed the woman through the house, only half listening to her sales pitch and suggestions, idly thinking she was wasting her time. He'd already committed himself to this place, and minute by minute, he was starting to think that `committed` was an apt term.

The tour didn't show up anything too unexpected, just a few old items of furniture, and a couple of boxes of junk left in what seemed to have been a recently added

garage. While the Realtor rambled on about the wonderful angle of light he'd get if he installed windows in the South facing walls, Evan walked over to the box, picking around in the old books and broken picture frames.

His momma always said he was too nosy for his own good. He couldn't help thinking of them as burrowing to the bottom of the second box yielded a faded, crumpled photo of the family that must have lived here. He wondered if they'd been happier than his own had become. Mom and Pop and their only son, he assumed. The mother smiled serenely at the camera, the father had one hand clapped onto his son's shoulder.

The boy looked to be around twenty, with dark hair and a serious expression. There seemed to be something self-conscious in the strangely stiff way he held himself, and Evan began making up a story about him in his head. He preferred to be out on the plains, riding an old but faithful horse. That faintly deer-in-headlights look was the product of his preference for watching the world from beneath the brim of an old cowboy hat, and—

“Ah, I see you've met your predecessors.”

“Were these the previous owners?” He looked up at the Realtor.

“Yes. That's an old photograph though,” she said, scrutinising the image. “Mr. Sheridan's been gone... must be six years this past spring. It's sad when you stop and think on it, but Zack was only eighteen when the old man died. You can't expect a boy that young to want to make a go of a place like this.”

Evan looked at the photo again, trying to imagine how Zack Sheridan might look now. Maybe those shoulders had broadened slightly, maybe there was more definition to a downright stubborn looking jaw.

And he's not a stud stallion, Evan, he reminded himself wryly. Quit staring like he's some piece of meat.

“Where did he go?”

“Zack? That boy doesn't know *what* he's doing.” She shrugged. “I was talking to him only yesterday and he seemed like an old man who'd given up already. Boy his age needs to snap right out of that ornery way of thinking.”

So he was still living locally, Evan mused, staring at the photograph. Maybe he should look the kid up, see if they could work something out regarding this old place.

Two hunches in one day. It wasn't a good sign.

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When he'd been a boy, there had been a dozen working ranches dotted across the county. Zack remembered his father's dealings with them, buying and selling livestock and equipment. One winter the snow had closed in and the bewildered livestock had scattered across the borders of several neighbouring ranches. It had taken his father the best part of a week to round them all up again and sort out who owned what.

Now, with the sale of his land there were two. Neither of them used the entirety of their land. One had taken to offering dude ranch vacations for city dwellers, complete with newly built spa and some gourmet chef who came from Denver during tourist season, and neither had a scrap of work for him this season.

At least one of his ex-neighbours had offered him the use of an old trailer, so that he could save what money he had left till he knew what he was going to do.

He didn't know if they felt sorry for him, or if they just saw him as Bill Sheridan's kid and paid back their gratitude to his father vicariously. Zack didn't care. He was past caring about a lot of things tonight.

On the jukebox in the corner of the bar, Tritt and Stuart declared that the whiskey ain't working anymore, but it seemed to be working just fine as far as Zack could tell. The music and the lazy chit-chat of the old regulars had faded to a pleasant background buzz. Zack had switched from beer to Jack Daniels a few drinks ago, and any reservations he'd had about it at the time had long been forgotten.

"You could always use a hand around the place, right?" He looked up, bleary eyed, at the bar's owner. Nora had been a fixture in this town as long as he could remember. "I can do anything, really."

"I wish I could, honey." Nora looked at him, a wry smile on ruby red lips. "Some weeks I'm lucky I can pay myself. But first thing I hear about, I'll letcha know."

That was the same story he got from everyone around town. Everyone was just scraping by. He supposed he should have been grateful that the tourists brought in some revenue to the area, kept some of the old ways going. But all he could remember was his father, sitting in the cab of their old truck, driving him back from a neighbour's place.

"Diversification..." Bill Sheridan had scoffed. "Just another word for giving in."

The heart attack might have forced his father to give in, but Zack had no excuse.

He didn't notice the silence that descended over the bar until he downed his drink, and tried to catch Nora's eye to order another. But she was at the other end of the bar, flirting with some guy Zack had never seen before.

Tourist, he sulked to himself, adding this negligence to his ever growing list of woes. And he wasn't checking the guy out. He was just curious, that's all.

If his father had known about *that*, then his old man would have had the heart attack sooner, and he'd have both his parents on his conscience.

Small mercies.

When he eventually caught Nora's attention, the guy looked his way too. Zack's vision was just on the wrong side of fuzzy, but even so he could make out golden blonde hair and bright blue eyes, the image fading and weaving like a cartoon. The man watched him for a second, before turning back to the glass before him when Zack sent him a glare.

He glanced at Nora, thinking he was whispering, and asked, "Who's that?"

"You don't know?" Nora looked surprised. "He's the guy who bought your old place."

His one -- or make that 'few' -- more for the road forgotten, Zack blinked, turning back to watch the blonde man. This was the man who owned everything Zack once held dear? This stranger, with his fancy clothes and pretty hair, he was the one who now walked through the rooms in which Zack grew up?

The anger built like one of the spring storms that came in off the mountains, slow and insidious. By the time Zack noticed this stranger had become the living embodiment of everything that was wrong with his life, it was too late to put a lid on it.

When he finally summoned up the nerve to confront the man, he was greeted by an empty barstool. It took his groggy thoughts a second to follow the chain of events, looking up in time to see the door closing behind the blonde.

Oh no, you're not walking away from me that easily...

Stumbling from the barstool, it took three attempts to put on his hat, his hand and his head never quite lining up right. But damned if he was going out there without it. It meant as much to him as a Roman gladiator putting on his shield and helmet.

Granted, Roman gladiators weren't usually three sheets to the wind and completely unable to walk in a straight line, but hell, he wasn't exactly fighting a tiger either. Just some pussy-whipped rich asshole who thought he could waltz in here and take over everything Bill Sheridan and all the Sheridans before him lived and died for.

"Hey!"

The blonde turned around, from a brand new gleaming pick-up, Zack noticed with a derisive snort. For a second the man frowned at him, as though trying to place who this idiot was.

"I wanna talk to you!" Zack went on, proud that his words only slurred on every other syllable. "I'm--"

“Zack Sheridan,” the man said, smiling as though he’d just remembered something important. “I know.”

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One thing was for certain, that photograph really didn’t do Zack any justice. In the flesh, albeit staggering and slurring, he was far more striking, as if he’d finally grown into the body that had seemed so awkward in that six year old picture.

Evan felt a little low for standing there appraising the kid while Zack stared at him like a dying goldfish, mouth opening and closing with no words coming out.

He considered telling Zack he’d seen his photo amid the old junk, but from that defiant look he doubted that was going to go down well.

“The Realtor told me who you were,” he said instead, after introducing himself. Unfortunately, that explanation didn’t fare much better, as Zack scowled at him.

“Ain’t none of your business who I am. What d’you care anyway?”

“Zack—“

“That’s *Mister* Sheridan to you.” Zack almost lost his balance completely as he huffed. No doubt the show was meant to intimidate him, but all Evan could think was that ‘Mister Sheridan’ made an endearing drunk.

Zack stared at him, frowned. “So?”

“So what?”

“Whatcha gonna do with the place now you got your goddamned rich paws on it?”

“Excuse me?”

“The ranch,” Zack said slowly, as though trying to explain something to a three year old. “Y’know, my home?”

That part he got. Evan was a little more irritated at the ‘goddamned rich paws’ part, but he doubted Zack was in any state to understand his complaint. Zack didn’t look like he understood English in his current condition. His hat was a little askew, tufts of collar length dark hair sticking out at odd angles beneath the brim. When they actually managed to focus, those eyes were as serious as they had been in the photograph.

The Realtor had told him a little about the Sheridans. He knew the property wasn’t the only thing Zack had lost over the past few years. After everything Zack had been through, Evan figured he was allowed to drown his sorrows now and then. But the kid

was as vicious and hard-headed as a pissed-off mustang, and Evan's sympathy didn't stretch to having his teeth knocked out.

He stepped back as Zack threw the first punch, moving slightly aside to avoid the second. The kid might have been too drunk to stand, but Evan still didn't much want to be on the receiving end of one of those blows. Even beneath the scruffy T-shirt and denim jacket, Zack's frame looked wiry and fast, if not all that solid.

Or well balanced. Evan blinked, stifling a smile as the momentum from another punch sent Zack into a wobbly spin. While Zack had his back to him, Evan stepped up, grasping the kid's upper arms firmly, forestalling any more fighting.

"It's really none of your business," he said quietly, close to Zack's ear, forcing him to lose concentration on the wriggling if he actually wanted to listen. "But, since you asked so nicely, I'm not going to do anything with the ranch."

The wriggling stopped altogether. The information took a while to filter through the whiskey haze that clung to Zack like a noxious cloud, and when it did all he could manage was; "Huh?"

Evan tried setting Zack back on his feet, but the kid seemed ready to topple over any second. Holding on seemed less complicated than letting Zack fall, and Evan would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy having a warm presence in his arms.

And while Zack's awareness was somewhere orbiting Planet Bourbon, he didn't have to worry about the niggling detail that he was as good as hugging a drunk redneck in the middle of a small town street. He might as well have put an ad in the paper.

Sighing, he hefted a slumping Zack upright again, wondering if the kid was falling asleep in that uncomfortable position. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

Zack mumbled something incoherent, words that Evan couldn't decipher even after asking Zack to repeat them three times. Buckling the kid into the front seat of the truck, Evan stared at him for a moment. Zack's lips were slightly parted, eyes closed, head lolling a little to one side.

He looked young for twenty-four, Evan thought. Or maybe vulnerable would be more accurate. For all his bluster, Zack Sheridan looked as though one angry word would shatter him. Without thinking, Evan reached out, fingertips gently moving a lock of hair from Zack's forehead. Zack mumbled something again, making a face as though some invisible fly was tickling at his nose, but didn't open his eyes, didn't demand to know what Evan thought he was doing.

It only occurred to him then that Zack had lost his hat. It lay in the middle of the empty street, black against the dark grey asphalt. Smiling to himself, Evan retrieved it, brushing off any imaginary dust before placing it on Zack's lap and shutting the door.

Getting into the truck and firing up the engine, he glanced at the young man sleeping in the passenger seat, and realised wryly that the only place he could take Zack really was home.

But somehow he didn't think it was going to be a sweet homecoming.

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Zack woke up staring at his bedroom ceiling, with a head that felt like six dozen Brahma bulls were stampeding right through it. Whimpering, he closed his eyes, tried to bury himself back under the sheets. Maybe it was still early enough that he could convince his mother to make him some breakfast before the day's chores began...

It all came crashing back around the same time as he rolled over with a groan, and opened his eyes to see the room completely empty save for the low camping cot on which he lay.

He might have been home, but it wasn't his home anymore.

Scenes replayed like a broken VCR. The bar. The rage. Yelling at Evan Hunter in the middle of the street like some screwed up harpy. He remembered throwing at least one punch, but a glance at his unbruised knuckles told him the blows hadn't connected with anything. Just as well.

He must have looked like an idiot. He was an idiot, if for nothing else than for showing a stranger how much this mess got to him.

Absurdly close to frustrated tears, he took out his mortification on the cot, pummeling the thin mattress with his fists like a child throwing a tantrum. Some fancy shrink on TV would have said he needed to express that inner turmoil or some such shit. They'd tell him he never got to show that when he'd been a kid, either for fear of his father whupping his ass, or, after the old man died, for fear of appearing out of control. He had the ranch. He had responsibilities. He had no time for tantrums.

Yeah, right. The shrinks had done a real bang-up job on his mother. If they'd never prescribed her those pills—

He kicked back the sheets angrily, trying to drown out the bitter thoughts with some kind of action. He needed to get out of here. He needed to make the most grudging apology possible to Evan Hunter, and he needed to leave.

He swore their ghosts were following him as he made his way to the kitchen. The hallways were lighter now, without all those old framed pictures lining the walls. Evan hadn't done much with the house, he noted. The discoloured flowered wallpaper still bore the brighter squares where the frames had once been.

The smell of cooking reached him before he even turned into the large kitchen. The crispy scent of bacon eggs and toast, was tempered by the tang of orange juice and the sweetness of coffee. Evan stood at the old range stove, dressed only in jeans and a half-open white shirt, and to his horror, Zack had no idea what had him salivating the most.

“Morning.”

The blonde glanced at him, and Zack blushed as though Evan had just read his thoughts. His gaze flickered desperately around the kitchen, looking for something else to stare at. His hat was sitting on the table. Zack recalled it falling off some time midst brawl last night, and now he couldn't take his eyes off the surreal image it made.

Hell, it beat staring at Hunter.

“I should go,” he said, dumbly. Evan ignored him, setting a plate down on the table.

“Do you have anywhere to go to?” the blonde asked, and Zack figured either it was a lucky guess or a direct hit. Either way, he couldn't refute it.

“Then sit down and eat.” Evan walked back over to the coffee pot at Zack's slight shake of the head.

“I ain't taking charity from the likes of you.”

“The likes of me?” Evan glanced at him, amused. “What, did you dream up some more crimes against humanity I'm guilty of while you were asleep? It's breakfast, kid. Not a marriage proposal.”

Something about that suggestion made Zack blush down to his boots, and he sat down dutifully, if only to avoid more remarks. Besides, venting his anger would have been far more satisfying if the object of his misplaced temper deigned to react. “Quit calling me kid.”

Evan looked at him pointedly. “Quit acting like one.”

They ate in silence. He would have argued more, Zack told himself, if he wasn't so damn hungry after last night's binge, and if the scent of breakfast didn't remind him of the ones his mother used to make. Besides, it was the least Evan could do.

No, the least Evan could do was absolutely nothing, which by happy coincidence was exactly what he owed Zack. It was a little harder to hold onto the resentment now without the courage afforded him by Mr. Daniels.

Evan didn't so much as glance at him as he stood, clearing the plates. “How're you feeling this morning?” He dumped the plates in the sink with a loud clatter, and if Zack had been wearing his hat instead of staring at it, it would have felt fifty sizes too small. “There's aspirin around here someplace if you need some.”

“I’m fine,” he lied.

“Suit yourself. There’s more coffee if you need any.”

Zack glared at him suspiciously. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Breakfast? Well, a guy has to eat y’know, and—“

“You know what I meant.”

“Yeah.” Evan sent him a lopsided grin over one shoulder, sounding utterly unrepentant. “Sorry.”

Another steaming cup of coffee was set down on the table in front of him regardless, and Zack tried to convince himself the strong aroma wasn’t playing its part in clearing his thoughts.

The rest...well, the rest was just Evan Hunter, who on closer sober inspection, didn’t seem to be quite the asshole Zack had branded him. He was still angry, but the anger was unfocused, sprawling out like weeds on the prairie, with no real target in mind. A little disconcerted, he found himself talking just to drown out his thoughts.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?”

“Were you that drunk last night?” One golden brow quirked, and a playful sparkle danced in blue eyes. “Damn.” He stuck out a hand towards Zack. “I’m Evan Hunter.”

“Yeah, I got that part.” Zack eyed the outstretched hand as though it was the business end of a rattlesnake, before accepting the handshake. Evan’s grasp was firm, cool fingers betraying years of physical labour that belied the polished appearance. “I meant why are you *here*.”

Evan laughed out loud, a sound that vibrated around the kitchen and made Zack realise he didn’t remember the last time he’d heard laughter in this house.

“Well, the free interrogation kinda swayed me.”

“I’m just asking.”

Something in Evan’s gaze softened, and he watched Zack in silence for a moment before continuing. “I was a racehorse trainer. I needed a change of pace, so I looked around for somewhere like this.” He explained tersely. “I’m not here to turn it into a theme park, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“So what are you gonna do with it?”

“I don’t know.” Evan turned to look out of the kitchen window. He’d taken down the pink patchwork curtains Zack remembered, the ones his mother bought one Christmas and had to cut about a foot of material from the bottom because she’d bought the

wrong size. Driving all the way back to exchange them had been out of the question. The bare window-frame looked bigger than Zack recalled. "Horses, maybe some cattle. I need to have a proper evaluation done on land use. Most of the place needs re-fencing, and the stable-block needs rebuilding entirely if I ever set up a stud." He glanced at Zack, blue eyes crinkling into a smile. "A picket fence, a hunting hound, the usual."

"And a little lady wife to cook dinner and clean your boots," Zack added dryly.

"Well..." Evan laughed softly, gaze fixed back out of the window at the mountains cutting across the horizon. He didn't look amused anymore, he looked a little sad. "Something like that, I guess."

Zack watched him dubiously, thinking of the suit with the blueprints. "You're not gonna open a spa?"

This time Evan's chuckle sounded warmer, less forced. "No, I'm not. I came here for some peace and quiet. I'm not planning on inviting the world over any time soon."

He should have been reassured by that, but all it served was to give the resentment nowhere to go.

"Where are you living?"

Zack was halfway through explaining about the trailer, when Evan shook his head, interrupting him.

"That's crazy, there's all this room here I'm not using for anything. Besides, I'm gonna need someone to help out around here, and if it's someone who already knows their way around it'll make my life a lot easier. Plus I can make sure you show up for work on time if you're living in." He laughed a little. "Sound like a plan?"

Zack stared at him. It took a few disbelieving attempts before he could speak. "Are you feeling sorry for me?"

"Not really." Evan shook his head. "I just don't see how you're going to prove you can pick yourself up if no-one's going to give you chances to do so." He sat across from Zack, leant back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. Zack schooled himself not to look at the narrow strip of bare skin that peeked between the edges of the blonde's shirt. "If I'm doing anything, I'm offering you a job."

"A job." Zack repeated.

"If you want it." Evan nodded. "Consider it this way, you can show me how you want this place run."

"I'm the reason you own it now."

“True.” The blonde nodded, and smiled. Something Zack couldn’t define skittered across his eyes, then it was gone. “But you don’t seem the kind of guy to make the same mistakes twice.”

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He’d been working for Evan Hunter for three weeks before he stopped to think about it. Zack didn’t know why the word “okay” slipped past his defences when Evan made the offer. He knew beggars couldn’t be choosers, and there wasn’t exactly an abundance of opportunities around here, but something about it made Zack a little grateful his father couldn’t see him now. Couldn’t see he’d sunk so low he had to be some rich guy’s stableboy.

Well, it wasn’t quite that bad. And currently there was no stable, just a pile of bricks and rubble while Evan looked around for contractors to build him a new block that met his surprisingly high standards. Zack had come to realise there was more to Evan’s impeccable exterior than just flaunting money. The man just took an incredible level of pride in anything he did, be it breakfast or horses or repainting the living room. Or, as they’d been doing for the past four days to kill time till the stables were finished, mending fences.

There wasn’t much else to do, miles from the ranch house with just the truck radio for company, but talk. Zack had only lost his temper once, when he’d been telling Evan about Rafferty, and the blonde made a disparaging remark about “mongrel” horses. He’d gone to sulk in the truck for twenty minutes, revelling in the loud clap of the slamming door as it echoed across the plain.

The radio turned against him when it played Tim McGraw telling him it was all because of the cowboy in him. He slunk out of the truck like a chastised child, picking up his abandoned tools and resuming where he left off, attaching new fence wire to the reinstalled posts. Evan had glanced at him, but hadn’t said a word, for which Zack was grateful.

Sometimes the silences, broken only by the metallic ring of the nails and the wires, was as comforting as any deep meaningful conversation. But as the spring afternoons became unseasonably warm, the heat exacerbated by the physical labour, conversations became a welcome distraction. It kept him from dwelling on the uncomfortable way his vest clung to his skin, and the clamminess where his hat met his scalp.

They’d exhausted every small-talk topic from Evan’s first rodeo to Zack’s first beer, so someone had to bring up some more serious subjects.

“What’s Europe like?”

“Honestly?” Evan looked up at him, and brushing sweat-damp gold bangs from his forehead with the back of his hand, and grinned. “It’s fucking amazing. Rains a lot, and it’s pretty cold sometimes, but it’s beautiful over there.”

Zack absorbed the information silently as they unrolled some more of the fence to the next post, before asking, “So why did you wanna come back?”

For a moment he didn’t think Evan had heard him. The blonde strode over to the truck, busied himself choosing a better hammer. Eventually he glanced up at Zack, and shrugged.

“Sometimes amazing isn’t enough.”

That answer might have made sense to someone as well-travelled as Evan Hunter, but to Zack it just seemed like a lame excuse.

He remembered the only time he’d been away from town on his own, on a high school trip to Salt Lake City when he was sixteen. He couldn’t even remember now the point of the trip, just that it had taken an eternity and a day to convince his parents to let him go. His father’s objection hadn’t even been the costs involved, just the ideas life in a big city might put in his son’s head.

Zack had all but given up asking his father for anything after the sermon he received upon mentioning his interest in joining the rodeo club at high school. Bill Sheridan had told him rodeos were for clowns who didn’t have the balls to be real cowboys, and that had been the end of the discussion.

But eventually, he’d been allowed to go on the trip. He was only gone five days, but they’d changed his life.

He’d been far too young, far too *terrified*, to sneak into the club he’d stumbled across while playing truant from the bland motel. But he hadn’t been too young to hide in the shadows in a small park across the street and watch the men that came and went.

Lying in the motel bed that night, with class geek Chuck Glazer snoring in the other bed, every image that flashed across Zack’s closed eyes had been of those men. Holding hands, kissing, laughing, all the things his classmates wanted to do -- among other things -- with homecoming queen Becky Allen. All Zack wanted to do to Becky was ask her where her older brother Petey got the new paint-job on his pick-up. Becky was a sweet girl, but the thought of being with her left Zack cold. Petey Allen on the other hand could still make him want to excuse himself and go spend some quality alone time in the bathroom.

He’d known then that he could never live that sort of life. Not if he went home and did the responsible thing by his family and the land. People like him just didn’t do that sort of thing.

At the time, that had been okay. It meant he didn’t have to think about it.

Zack gazed around the pasture, the endless panorama bathed in hazy afternoon sunlight. He couldn't imagine leaving this, he couldn't imagine anything that would make him want to be anywhere else. When he said as much aloud, Evan just smiled ruefully.

"I used to think that way too. Now I couldn't be far enough away from that place."

"Texas?"

"Yeah." Evan nodded. "Home."

Zack almost winced at that one word. *Home*. Like it was the most loved, most hated, most missed place on earth.

"When's the last time you went back?"

He swore Evan started hammering the nails harder as he spoke, punctuating his words with loud violent blows. "Four years ago. I was back from Europe for a vacation, and..."

Zack waited clean through two more assaults on the fence nails for Evan to finish that trailed-off sentence before curiosity got the better of him. "Did you have fight with somebody or something?"

Evan raised his head, arching a brow. "Are you always this nosy, or are you making a special effort for me?"

A flush crept across Zack's cheeks that had nothing to do with the heat. "Sorry."

"Ah, it's okay." Evan paused, blue eyes squinting a little against the sun as he looked at Zack. Leaning against the fence-post, he wiped his hands on dirty jeans, and nodded slowly. "Yeah, I had a fight with somebody. With my dad and with my...business partner."

"What happened? I mean..." Zack looked away sheepishly, and mumbled, "If you wanted to talk about it."

"Let's just say neither of them were awful happy with the directions I was taking in my life." Cutting the conversation short with a shrug, he levered himself away from the post, striding back towards the truck. "Come on, that's good enough for one day." He flashed Zack a grin as he pulled open the driver's side door. "Besides, if you're not careful, someday I'm gonna start asking you twenty questions."

Zack pulled the brim of his hat a fraction lower, trailing after Evan. Getting into the truck, he slammed the door and rested one arm on the rolled down window. "You can if you want."

Letting the powerful engine idle with a rumbled purr, Evan watched him with a curious expression. At Zack's scowl, he laughed softly. "Maybe I'll wait till you're ready to tell me."

Even if Zack had a response to that, he didn't get a chance to reply before Evan put the truck in gear and pulled away in a cloud of dust.

*

After the heat of the pastures, the ranch house was a welcome relief. The cold seemed to seep out of the stones and the shadows, and Evan had to fight the urge to kick off his boots and stand barefoot on the kitchen tiles. He settled for snaffling two cold beers from the fridge instead, handing one to Zack as he sat at the table.

Taking a sip, he basked in the lazy contentment of the moment, so pleased that there was someone here to share the quiet calm with him that he spoke without thinking.

"I'm glad you're here."

Zack paused, his beer halfway to his lips, and stared at him. Evan could kick himself for his slip.

"Everything's progressing quicker than I reckoned." He shrugged, taking a nonchalant swig of beer. "I might be able to start looking at livestock in a couple of weeks, and I'd never have gotten things on track that quickly without your help."

It wasn't an entire lie, Zack's effort and hard work had been invaluable. But Evan had spent twenty years perfecting the art of covering up hopelessly ill-thought remarks like that, and it was a hard habit to shake. Of course sometimes the cover was unnecessary; he'd met his last two lovers through badly timed comments.

Zack though, was off limits, and Evan knew it.

"Yeah well," Zack muttered, as though he was speaking to his beer. "Wish I'd had the money to plough into it that you do."

"It's not about the money." Evan shook his head. "It's about getting to start over with this place, clean sheet and no baggage. You didn't have that."

Zack brooded over that for a moment. "Maybe."

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

Grey eyes snapped up to glare at him. "Who said it was?"

“No-one. I’m just saying. With the best will in the world, no-one was gonna be able to pick this place up from the mess it was in when you inherited it. I’ve seen the books, Zack. You were damn lucky to get as much back for this place as you did.”

“Yeah. My dad’s creditors were cock-a-hoop.” Zack looked at him, tone bitter. “You happy to know that’s who’s enjoying your money right now? Some fuckers who took my dad and me for a ride way back when.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? That’s what people deserve, right? If they make bad deals, stupid agreements just to keep a claw hold on something they’re gonna lose anyway.”

They sat out the silence for several minutes, before Zack stood abruptly, chair scraping back along the tiled floor. His abandoned beer bottle was still wobbling precariously on the tabletop when Evan heard Zack’s door slam shut.

Draining his own beer, he threw both bottles in the trash. He’d be enjoying his own company for a while until Zack deemed himself fit for contact with the outside world again, and Evan figured he might as well do something useful with his time.

Just in case Zack thought he was waiting for him, or, God forbid, worried about him. He appreciated Zack hadn’t really been allowed to have an adolescence, but sometimes he wished the kid wasn’t trying to cram eight years into eight weeks.

He almost sighed with relief as he stepped into the bathroom. Turning on the shower, the steam began to fill the room while he stripped off every dusty, sweaty piece of clothing.

It hadn’t been on his mind when he stepped under the massaging spray of water, but the moment he began thinking about Zack again, Evan’s thoughts of the kid took a turn for the wicked. His cock rose to attention the moment his fingers touched it, though as his eyes fluttered closed, he imagined they belonged to someone else. In his mind, Zack was pinned between him and the tiled wall. Sliding one hand up his chest, he pretended it was his imaginary lover’s touch, pretended Zack was softly teasing his nipples with one hand, stroking his growing erection with the other.

He’d watched the kid’s hands plenty while they’d been working. The long boned fingers looked as though they belonged on a fragile pianist, even though the pads of his fingers were callused from a lifetime in the saddle. The touch was soft though, he imagined, gentle and inquisitive.

Zack had never mentioned lovers, girlfriends or otherwise, and the sheer lack of information betrayed the kid’s inexperience. So he’d be shy at first, Evan decided, hesitant until he gained some confidence from the blonde’s soft cajoling.

With confidence came more curiosity. He imagined Zack exploring and experimenting, learning by the sounds Evan made where to touch, what pressure and friction yielded the desired effect. Even in the fantasy though, something kept Evan from returning the

touch. He feared that if he pushed too soon, even make-believe Zack would turn and run. And with the imaginary touch stroking harder and faster, Evan really didn't want it ending abruptly.

The climax when it came caught him by surprise with its ferocity. Belatedly, he realised he had no idea whether he'd cried out or not. If he'd cried out the one name that had been looping in his head, then he was locking himself in the bathroom for eternity.

But there was no sound apart from the rush of the water. For a moment he stayed braced against the wall, catching his breath and watching the evidence of his fantasy wash away.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought about Zack like that, but it was the first time he'd acted on those thoughts. He never thought he'd feel quite this guilty for jerking off in the shower, even if the object of his arousal was only a few feet away across the hallway. He hadn't lusted surreptitiously over someone that unattainable since he was younger than Zack.

Come to think of it, he hadn't been so lost in fantasy for a long time either. Not since Clay. The thought of his ex was like another cold shower on the lingering desire, though he couldn't help wondering wryly how Clay would have reacted to being described as Evan's 'business partner'. Only if that business had been six years and some of the best sex and worst hurt of his life.

Turning the water off, he reached out past the curtain for the towel rail. In his eagerness to get into the shower, he hadn't given much thought to getting out, and the only thing on the rail was one fluffy white hand-towel, barely enough to wrap around his hips.

Not that it mattered, he thought, towelling himself off roughly. His room was just next door, and it wasn't as though he'd see hide nor hair of Zack again until later. The towel wrapped around his hair to keep the water from dripping, he stepped out of the room, deciding that he really needed to add an en suite to this old place, maybe even sooner than a new stable block.

He was closing the bathroom door quietly behind him when Zack's door across the hall swung open.

Zack froze, and Evan could just stare at him. Images of his little indiscretion in the shower danced cruelly across his mind, and he felt his body twitch in response.

He willed it away, willed Zack's eyes not to travel south, but neither plea wanted to comply. Zack's eyes went wider than the moon, and his cheeks flushed crimson, and before turning to flee down the hall, he managed a choked little, "I'm sorry."

*

"Zack, wait...!"

I didn't do that. I didn't see that. I sure as hell didn't stand there staring at that...

The mantra wasn't doing much for the sheer mortification coursing through his veins. Somewhere along the line it had infused with the overwhelming lust he'd felt at seeing that perfect body exposed in front of him like a centrefold. He'd seen and quietly appreciated parts of Evan before, he tried to reason. He'd seen that defined chest and those strong shoulders bared countless times, each image filed away for later perusal.

But never like that. Never gloriously naked, skin still glistening from the shower, half tumescent and looking as though he'd just been transported from a wet dream.

Evan caught up with him in the kitchen. Zack had actually been trying to find the front door, but every synapse was focused either on that naked body, or on trying to will down the arousal that stirred in his jeans like he was a horny kid.

“Zack, I'm sorry. There wasn't a towel, and I didn't know where you were so...”

Evan kept talking, but Zack couldn't hear him. The thump of his heartbeat was racing through his head like a freight train, and Evan's voice came from far away, as though he was underwater.

The dull pain of backing up into the kitchen counter brought with it a grain of lucidity, just enough to replace the thought of Evan with the thought of getting out of here. He could deal with this better without that concerned blue gaze trained on him like a laser.

Pushing away from the counter, he tried to shoulder past the blonde, but somehow Evan's hands had come to rest on the chipped Formica worktop either side of his waist. He wasn't pinned or trapped badly enough that he couldn't get away if he tried. But with Evan that close, and rational thought melting away like summer rain, Zack couldn't summon the will to move.

When Evan kissed him, Zack bit back the whimper. It was just a chaste meeting of lips, the blonde's mouth gentle against his own, but it was still more than Zack had ever done before. Panic threatened to overwhelm him, and he almost pulled back to apologise to Evan for not knowing what he was supposed to do.

Evan's hands slid up his arms, resting carefully on his shoulders. The kiss was still undemanding, nothing more than soft brushes and nibbles, stirring up an intoxication more potent in Zack's blood than anything he ever drank.

He'd never known anything so terrifying, and so exhilarating. Here in the familiar near-silence of his what had been his kitchen, the groove in the counter where he'd dropped one of his father's hammers while trying to fix a leaky pipe digging into his lower back, Evan's kisses felt right.

If there was anything in his mind past the sudden terror of that empty trailer, of going to sleep with nothing but the silence wrapped around him, then it was Evan Hunter.

Even if Zack was only at the receiving end of some joke he hadn't quite gotten yet. If it meant a moment when he didn't have to be alone, he'd take that risk.

Evan seemed a little confused by the compliance, faltering in the kiss for a fraction of a second. Then his lips were moving against Zack's again, the tip of his tongue dragging slowly along his lower lip, begging entrance that after a moment's hesitation, was granted.

His first real kiss. In his parents' old kitchen with another man. It didn't get much more mind-bendingly surreal than that.

The hands that had rested on his shoulders slid down his upper arms, snaked behind his back, locking there. Hungry for contact, Zack's arms wound around Evan's neck, one hand sliding into tousled blonde hair.

Silent suggestion made and equally wordlessly accepted, the heat of the kiss banked to full flame. Heat that licked along his nerves, teased at the very edges of what sanity he had left as the blonde pressed a knee between his, nudging his thighs apart slightly before rubbing purposefully.

In retrospect, if common sense was going to beat him into submission, it could have chosen a better time. *Before* he was rubbing up against a naked Evan and moaning like a bitch in heat might have been an idea.

Evan was staring at him when Zack pulled away, breathing hard, one hand rising unbidden to swipe at his lips like he'd tasted something sour.

"Zack..." Evan began, reaching out for him half-heartedly. Zack took a step out of reach, shaking his head.

"That...I'm sorry, I...we shouldn't have." He backed away from the blonde's touch, avoiding that intent blue stare.

"Wait, please..."

He got as far as the front door before Evan caught up with him, and by then confusion had a chance to fester and become something angrier, something that wanted to kick and lash out.

You did this to me! He wanted to scream. I'd been ignoring it all just damn fine before you showed up.

But the words that did spit from his lips like venom were even more vicious. "You might be able to buy the ranch, but you cannot fucking buy me, okay? Take your job, take your pity, take your sick fucking fantasies and leave me the hell alone."

Evan just stared at him. The hand that had begun reaching for Zack again stilled, then slid back limply to his side like some puppet master had cut his strings. If he said anything else, Zack was too far away to hear him.

*

Zack hadn't been back for five days. Day one, Evan hadn't expected him; he'd known Zack long enough to know how stubbornly he held grudges. Day two he'd decided to stay home instead of driving out on his own, in case Zack came by. Day three, if Zack had a phone where ever he was, Evan knew he'd have been calling since daybreak, just to hear his voice.

So when the phone finally rang -- day five and counting -- he almost broke an ankle clambering over the couch to pick it up.

"Zack?"

"No," an amused voice drawled on the other end of the line. "But if it gets you panting that way at me some more, I could be."

Evan slumped onto the couch with a sigh. "Sorry. I was expecting a call from someone else..."

"No shit. Since when are you answering your telephone like some sex-starved teenager?"

"Since I didn't think anyone down there had this number." He paused, frowning. "How do you have this number?"

Tommy Trevane chuckled, a sign Evan recognised from his high school days to mean he was getting no information out of his friend. Long time friend, and once business advisor. No-one had been more surprised than Evan when his high school's star quarter back whom it was widely assumed had an IQ less than his shirt number, got into a top business school on a football scholarship. He got over the shock when Tommy came home, qualifications coming out the gills, and suggested he help with Evan's business and financial dealings, for a nominal administrative fee, of course.

For several years, Tommy Trevane had been Evan's *real* business partner. He remembered the casual lie he'd told when Zack asked about the reasons he didn't go home, and wondered again whether Zack would still be here now if he'd told the truth.

No. If he'd told Zack the truth, the kid wouldn't have stuck around long enough for that awkward, breathtaking kiss. His hand rose unconsciously to his lips at the memory.

Whoever said a little was better than nothing needed to be dragged out into the street and shot.

"Who's Zack?" Tommy asked in lieu of an answer. Tommy was as straight as a fence-post, but he'd been one of the few who'd never berated Evan for his own preferences.

Live and let live, that was Tommy's motto, and if that person lived to pay him money, then all the better.

"My ranch-hand."

"Is that what they call it these days?"

With a half-hearted growl, Evan glared at the receiver as though Tommy could get a full Technicolor picture. "What do you want?"

"Fine, so don't tell me about your girlfriend." Tommy laughed. "Actually I was calling because I came across a juicy bit of information on the vines." There was the sound of shuffling paper. "Seems there's a very lucrative little business proposition in the works."

From experience, this call could take a while. Getting up and making his way to the kitchen, Evan smiled wryly.

"I'm retired."

"Hell you are. No-one retires at thirty four. Especially not someone at the peak of his game."

"Well, you know what they say about quitting at the top."

"Bullshit. You can't ever quit, it's branded too deep in you."

"Yeah, right." Evan laughed, the telephone receiver cradled between his jaw and shoulder as he scooped coffee into the machine. "Did you call for a free analysis, or are you ever planning on getting to the point?"

"Aren't I allowed to call to inquire about your well-being?"

"You are, but you wouldn't. So what is it?"

"How's things up there in the backwoods?"

Evan paused. Five days ago he would have said things were perfect.

Now those things were tainted with Zack's ugly words echoing in his head, bringing with it the sheer frustration of how he was meant to approach him again, if he was at all. However stupid his actions had been, Zack's reaction was out of line...

Who are you trying to convince? What did you expect him to think?

"Could be better," he replied finally.

“Then listen up, buddy, cause you’re not gonna be able to turn this down. How quick can you get rid of that podunk waste of time you bought up there and get your ass back to the real world?”

*

When you stopped and thought about it, three weeks wasn’t all that long. Twenty-one days, however many hundreds of hours. It didn’t seem long enough to get so used to somebody’s presence that you missed them when it was gone.

But he did. He missed the scent of breakfast, and the way Evan hummed off-key to the radio, even when he didn’t know the songs. He missed the silence of the pastures as they worked, and he missed going to sleep knowing someone else was in the house, knowing everyone was safe and accounted for. He missed feeling as though for the first time in years, the ranch was truly home.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt that way.

The trailer had been home again for the past five days and four miserable nights. The smell was of damp and old oil, not of frying bacon. The noises at night weren’t Evan shuffling around in the kitchen for three in the morning coffee that the blonde claimed helped him sleep.

Zack wondered if Evan was losing as much sleep as he was. Maybe the other man had just chalked him up to a loss and moved on. He didn’t want to believe Evan was like that, but the more he dwelled upon it, the more it seemed as though he’d been set up from the beginning.

It didn’t make it hurt less. It didn’t drown out the taste of Evan’s kisses, like sunshine and sweet grass. The memory of his lips lingered no matter how often Zack brushed his teeth, no matter how many cheap, bitter coffees he drank.

The musty silence had eventually become too hard to take, and he’d taken himself out for a walk. He had no destination in mind, not even two hours later when he found himself at the last place he wanted to be. Standing in front of Evan’s door, he blamed his traitorous body for bringing him back here. Literally and figuratively.

But he was still raising a hand to knock, even while his brain screamed at him to turn and run.

Evan already looked a little shell-shocked when he answered the door. In the sleepless silence of the past four nights, Zack had prepared for a million things the blonde could say to him, but he hadn’t expected a slightly stunned mumble.

“Why are you knocking when you have a key?”

“I…” Searching for anywhere else to look, Zack shrugged. “I didn’t know if you’d wanna see me.”

Evan breathed a soft laugh, and when Zack dared glance up at him, the expression in those blue eyes was a gentle affection. Zack ignored the flare of disappointment in the pit of his stomach. What had he expected, that the blonde would fling him down onto the front porch and ravish him then and there?

He must have made a squeaked noise as he tried stamping down that image. Evan blinked at him curiously, before shaking his head. “I want to see you. I’ve wanted to see you for five days.”

Something warm tempered the disappointment at those words. “You did?”

“Yeah.” Evan took a step back, allowing Zack room to walk through the door. “I missed you.”

The warmth was joined by a grey blanket of guilt that had been spinning on the periphery of his awareness ever since he left. Staring at his boots, and blushing down to them too, he spoke softly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have run out like that.”

Evan watched him carefully. “It’s okay. You were right, we probably shouldn’t have done that.”

Head snapping up, the words tumbled from Zack’s lips before he could rein them back. “You didn’t want to? But I thought...I mean—“ He stared helplessly at Evan, wishing to God he didn’t have to put any of this into coherent words. He doubted he was capable of coherent breathing right now.

“Yeah,” Evan said quietly. “I wanted to. That doesn’t make it a good idea. It doesn’t mean I had a right to do it without making sure you wanted it too.”

It wasn’t even a question, but it was an echo of precisely what Zack had been thinking for the past five days. And it was a damn sight easier to believe in the games when he wasn’t staring into Evan’s eyes, close enough that he could feel the blonde’s breath, hear the soft shifting of his old work shirt as it moved with every exhale.

“I did.”

Something seemed to melt away in Evan’s expression at that, his posture seemed a little lighter, a little more confident.

“It’s just...” Zack went on, suddenly wanting to drown out the silence. “There’s just never been anyone else and...”

“No-one?” Evan sounded surprised.

Zack shook his head, deciding the humiliation couldn’t get much worse. “Never even been on a date.” He forced a smile. “Always figured I’d have time for that when I went to college. But then my dad...” He trailed off with a shrug. “Anyway, I had to stay and take care of this place, so it never happened.”

He didn't particularly want Evan's pity, so he averted his gaze. Truthfully, he had the overpowering need to be wrapped up in the blonde's arms again, but he wasn't going to ask. His battered pride had some limits.

"It's all right," Evan said after a moment, one hand coming to rest on Zack's shoulder, his thumb briefly brushing his cheek. "We'll just take all this real slow, okay?"

It was just the smallest of touches, but it almost made up for five days in one single second. Zack looked up, nodded slightly, feeling as though he'd been allowed to come home.

"Okay."

*

"Come on man, there's nothing keeping you up there. Come back and live the damn dream!"

Funny, that out of everything Tommy had said, Evan latched onto those words the most.

It was a lucrative offer, that was the problem. And if it had come a month, two months ago, Evan doubted he'd have even thought of refusing.

The Delaney stud was one of the most successful in the Southwest. It had long been the premier establishment even when Evan started out. If a horse had Delaney blood anywhere within ten generations then it wasn't unheard of to slap another zero to the price. They had the best stock and the best staff in the business.

And when a controlling share of the business was reputed to be for sale, Evan should have been at the head of the queue, pleading on bended knee.

But he wasn't. He was moping around a rundown Wyoming ranch house, wondering whether he should turn down the chance for the sake of a stone-stubborn country boy, ten years his junior, who didn't seem to know his ass from his elbow when it came to deciding what he wanted.

Was Zack worth that much to him? When exactly had he come to feel so much for the younger man? The rambling conversations about nothing out in the fields? The comfortable silence of breakfasts? Long before he tasted those lips, that was for certain. The kiss hadn't felt like the beginning of something, it had felt like a stage reached.

Besides, it had to count for something that Zack came back, of his own free will. Apart from that mumbled apology, they hadn't really spoken about it, but if Zack found the thought that abhorrent, surely he'd have hitched up his trailer to the first thing heading

out of town? A guy didn't come back to someone who so clearly wanted him unless there was the smallest chance of reciprocation.

Right?

Each time Evan thought he knew for sure, each time he was certain he'd seen something in Zack's eyes, heard something in his voice, something else made him doubt. His pre-occupation probably didn't help Zack's temperament either, but he didn't see how he could explain it calmly to the younger man.

Hadn't he thought from the beginning that Zack had lost enough already? He couldn't stand the thought of adding himself to that list, be it as employer, friend, or anything else that might come of this.

He needed to know where Zack stood, needed to know what the younger man wanted. And unless the answer to the latter was `you`, then he needed to rethink his priorities and what he wanted for himself.

Their days had settled back into an uneasy routine over the past couple of week. The silences didn't feel as comfortable anymore, and getting Zack to say anything to him that wasn't strained and polite felt like pulling hens' teeth with Jell-O pliers.

At least they still ate meals together. Evan had never asked, but he wondered if Zack had grown up, like he had, with the belief imprinted on him that the kitchen table was the nucleus of the household. It had certainly been where Evan's family ate together, talked together, fought together. It had been where he sulked while his parents doled out punishment. It had been where he sat them down to tell them he was leaving for Europe.

It had been where he'd sat numbly, after his father told him not to bother setting foot in the house again until he snapped out of this unnatural, ungodly phase.

But where once Zack would have helped with the cooking, or at least sat down and joked with him after his culinary exploits ended up charred and in the garbage, now he sat in the living room until Evan told him the food was done.

And that's where he was, sitting tensely on the couch like he was a guest in his own home, while Evan kept an eye on that night's dinner.

His hands had been full when the phone rang, and after a colourful stream of curses, he yelled, "Zack, can you get that?"

There was no reply, but the phone stopped ringing abruptly, and above the clatter of plates and cutlery, Evan heard Zack's soft voice speaking to someone. He couldn't make out the words, but he was expecting calls both from a Pinedale horse dealer, and the building contractors.

It never even occurred to him that it could be someone else, until he walked back into the living room. The telephone receiver still hung limply in Zack's hands, as he stared at Evan with eyes like ice.

"When were you planning on telling me?"

"Telling you what?"

"This!" Zack waved the phone in front of him angrily. "Some guy just called wanting to know how the sale was going and when you reckoned you'd be back in Texas."

Tommy, I'm going to kill you...

"Zack—"

"Fuck you!" Flinging the telephone onto the couch, Zack stormed past him, shoulder barrelling into Evan's arm. "Fuck you, fuck your lies, fuck your bullshit!"

"Zack!" Reaching out, Evan grasped Zack's wrist, yanked him back around to face him. "I didn't tell you because it's not happening."

"Let go of me!" Zack growled, snatching his arm out of Evan's grip. "You're lying. Everything you've said has been a fucking lie. Well congratulations, you had me totally fucking fooled. Hope that makes you happy."

"You think seeing you hurt makes me happy?"

"It must do, or you'd quit doing it!"

"Zack I'm not leaving. I don't know what Tommy told you, but he's wrong. He's been trying to convince me to take up this business offer for weeks, and—"

"Weeks?" Zack barked out a humourless laugh. "You've known for weeks?"

"That's not the point. The point is I'm not going. Why would I want to? Everything I care about is here."

Zack stopped tearing the living room apart in a search for his jacket, and stared at him for an infinite moment, before turning away. "Yeah. Everything you care about, and me."

"I do care about you, don't you dare tell me you don't know that."

"Whatever." Zack glanced at him, finding his jacket and putting it on angrily, hands punching through the sleeves. "Fact is, I don't care. About any of it."

Evan followed him towards the door, his voice sounding desperate to his own ears. "You don't mean that."

He reached out again, determined not to let Zack leave like this. Even if he couldn't get Zack to admit his feelings, damned if he was letting the kid walk out not knowing where Evan stood.

He couldn't quite stifle the soft intake of breath when he turned Zack around. The glare was incensed, even through the tears, but all Evan could comprehend was the sheen of moisture in angry, red-rimmed eyes. He'd done that. He'd put that hurt there. He knew how fragile their tenuous relationship was, but he'd done it anyway.

"I'm sorry..." He pulled the resistant form close, speaking softly against Zack's hair. The man in his arms stayed unresponsive, but right now Evan didn't care. The comfort could be a one way street, that was okay. Anything was okay if he could stop Zack from leaving, stop those tears.

It felt like forever before Zack's arms slid hesitantly around Evan's waist, hands balling into tight fists in the back of his shirt, mumbling brokenly against his chest.

"Everyone leaves. Everyone always fucking *leaves!*"

Holding Zack at arms length, Evan looked at him stubbornly, willing the younger man to believe him, and shook his head.

"I don't."

*

Somehow the reassurance fell flat. The one thing Zack needed to hear Evan say, and he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it.

"Not this time, maybe. But next time, or the time after that."

Evan just smiled at him, one hand stroking his cheek. "So you're gonna throw this away just cause of something that might happen?"

"Throw what away?"

Zack tried to avoid that blue gaze, but the blonde caught his chin gently. The other arm winding around his shoulders, Evan leaned closer, capturing his lips in the lightest of kisses.

"That."

"Evan, I—"

"No." The blonde watched him intently, one finger pressed to Zack's lips. "Don't say anything. Just trust me, please...?"

He shouldn't. He shouldn't be so foolish. But something in Evan's gaze just made him nod. Evan smiled at him, a dazzling expression that felt like sunshine. He kissed Zack softly again, before taking his hand, coaxing him down the hallway like he might a skittish colt.

His heart was up somewhere in his throat when Evan tugged him into his bedroom, shutting the door behind them. Hands on Zack's shoulders, the blonde pressed a kiss to his hair. "You draw the line, okay?"

Zack swallowed hard, and nodded. "Okay."

He didn't draw the line at the slow, sweet kiss Evan shared with him. He didn't draw the line at being sat on the edge of the bed, or when Evan leaned a little more weight onto him, pressing him back onto the sheets.

He didn't want to draw the line *anywhere*. If anything was going to limit him, it was his sheer inexperience.

Zack might not have been the best student in the world, but he was a quick learner, and he hoped the passion with which he wanted this made up for his mistakes. Evan didn't seem to mind, just smiling softly at him every time Zack pulled back with a mumbled apology.

He remembered the guys at school who used to be so completely desperate to get past first base. Zack didn't understand their haste. He could have stayed kissing Evan forever, savouring the taste, the warmth, the whisper of the blonde's breathing against his cheek.

But instead of sating the hunger, the kisses just stoked it to wilder heights.

The kiss became deeper in an attempt to keep up with the want. Evan's tongue stroked soft and slow against his own, one moment massaging, the next suckling. His head spinning with that strange intoxication that was just his proximity to this man, Zack tightened his arms around Evan's neck, legs wrapping around the blonde's waist. He moaned as his arousal was pressed firmly against Evan's abdomen, the metal of his belt buckle biting into Zack's skin in a way that wasn't quite pleasure, wasn't quite pain.

The heat of the blonde's answering erection was like a fire beneath him, rubbing against the juncture of his legs. Evan's hands slid further down, under his ass, kneading a little as they lifted him, pressed him closer. Zack broke the kiss with a moan, muffled only by biting down on Evan's shoulder. The blonde groaned in inarticulate reply, betraying his need.

"Zack..!" Evan's head snapped back with a gasp as Zack ran his hands down his new lover's chest. The muscles quivered beneath soft skin, and the blonde's moan was a low rumbled vibration when Zack shyly brushed his fingertips over the clothed erection straining at the front of Evan's pants.

“Sorry.” He snatched his hand back when Evan breathed his name again, almost in warning.

“No...” The blonde smiled down at him breathlessly. “This’ll just be over too quick if you keep doing that.”

One of Evan’s hands found its way under the worn fabric of his shirt, deft exploring fingers meeting soft warm skin. Zack whimpered at the way Evan lingered over the task of unbuttoning his shirt. Fingers teased at the skin beneath the material, barely grazing, before eventually stroking, almost tickling. A flat-palmed caress ran back up Zack’s chest, long elegant fingers catching the hardened nub of a nipple, scissoring across it, tweaking.

Evan chuckled softly when Zack tugged him close again, and kissed him. Every cry was swallowed up in the battle the kiss became, the delicious fight for control. Every lick or nip was met with a counter attack. Zack arched up into the touches like his skin was magnetised to Evan’s fingers.

Then the hand had moved lower, trapped between their bodies, fingers curving around the length of the hardened shaft outlined against the front of his pants. Zack hadn’t even noticed the kiss had broken, except that his cries were suddenly louder. Evan drew back a little, watching him as he thrust slowly, pinning his hand firmly against Zack.

“Oh God...!” Granted, Zack didn’t know much, but even he knew that creaming his pants before Evan had even taken them off was a big no-no. The blonde had made him stop, but Zack didn’t think he had the strength to return the favour. His body wanted appeasing, and wanted it now.

He whimpered when the hand drew away. Evan just grinned at him, looking pleased, kissing him before Zack could cuss at him.

Fingers tugged at the waist of his pants, unfastening them clumsily, as soft lips and warm breath whispered against his cheek, against the expanse of skin beneath his ear, murmuring heated words that may or may not have been incoherent. Zack was past listening. Past the point of being able to focus on anything except the fingers tugging his pants down, nails raking bluntly over the angles of his hipbone.

A sudden flare of embarrassment made him blush and turn his head away. What if Evan didn’t like looking at him like this, what if--?

“You’re beautiful.” Evan kissed him gently, soothing away nerves with a touch. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Those words swimming around his head, Zack didn’t pay attention to where Evan’s lips were straying until he felt a warm tongue circling his navel, cool breath against the wet skin, before sliding lower.

He'd never even had someone else's hand around his cock before. Now he had Evan Hunter's mouth wrapped around him. Each movement of lips and tongue left trails of electricity in their wake, and there was nothing Zack could do or think of to keep the orgasm from flooding his senses.

Evan stayed where he was until Zack's body had stopped jerking and was just trembling faintly. He couldn't even look at the blonde anymore, horrified at his own lack of control.

"I'm sorry—" he began, before Evan shushed him with a kiss. There was a foreign taste on his lips, and Zack shivered at the awareness that the taste was him.

"Don't be. Don't ever be sorry again."

The kisses resumed again, a little more relaxed now. But with Evan's knowing touches, it wasn't long before Zack was wriggling beneath him, demanding more. The blonde chuckled at his pleas, sitting back slightly.

One leg braced against Evan's shoulder, Zack reached frantically for anything to hold onto under the perfectly synchronised dual assault of one finger sliding slowly into him, and fingers wrapping firmly around his arousal. Bucking under Evan's touch, he almost sobbed with want, the ache that seeped into his blood, made him thrash about on the sheets. Breathing fast and shallow, he clung to the blonde's arms, fingers biting into the skin.

"Is that okay?" Evan's voice was far away again, muffled and disorientating.

Zack just nodded. Evan watched him for another concerned moment, before slowly beginning to slide the digit back and forth. The sensation was strange as hell, but not painful. At least not till the blonde added a second finger, and Zack's body protested at being stretched in this unfamiliar way.

He tried to bite back the wince, but Evan noticed anyway. Stilling, he pressed a kiss to Zack's neck.

"Do you want me to stop? It's okay if—"

"No." Zack shook his head, eyes squeezed shut. "No."

"Okay." Evan nodded, voice soft. "Let me find something that's gonna help."

Blindly he sensed the blonde groping frustratedly for something on the night-stand just past his head. Zack just whimpered loudly at the loss of those fingers, feeling incredibly empty without them, pain forgotten.

When he opened his eyes, Evan was gazing at him. Those blue eyes didn't look calm or amused anymore, they looked ruthless. Like Evan knew what he wanted and wouldn't stop till he got it. Zack shivered at the thrill that look sent racing down his spine, gasping Evan's name loudly as two slick fingers returned to brush against his

entrance, sliding in with little resistance this time, and began to thrust and stretch him in earnest.

He didn't feel himself tense as the blonde finally positioned himself, hotter moisture pressing against the over sensitised opening, but he must have been, more than he realised. Those soft lips were against his again, kissing gently, Evan's free hand rubbing soothing strokes against his thigh.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, Zack..."

"I know." He nodded. "I'm okay."

And he was. Evan went slowly and carefully, and there was still a sharp flare of pain, but Zack kept reminding himself how perfect it would be when the stinging ebbed away. This was what he wanted, this was what he'd always wanted. And he needed this man with a hunger he'd never known.

Evan made a throaty whimpered sound, noises that betrayed the frustration at wanting the teasing to go on longer. But half buried in Zack's body beneath him, teasing gave way to instinct and reflex, movements that required little conscious effort. It was just what their bodies demanded, settling into a rhythm they couldn't have broken anymore than they could have stopped blinking, stopped breathing.

Zack's legs wrapped tightly around Evan's waist, riding the slow, powerful thrusts that made the bed frame bash against the wall. Evan's fingers tightened around his arousal, stroke firm but excruciatingly slow, fingertips tracing every ridge, experimenting with different pressure points, no doubt noting and filing away every whimpered or moaned reaction. A warm palm cupped the head of his cock, enveloping it completely, twisting slightly back and forth, before sliding back down. Zack bucked against the touch like an unbroken mustang, riding sensations that sent his world tilting when Evan's cock touched that place inside him that left him mindless, boneless, consumed by the heat.

The things the body above his was doing were the most tender ministrations he'd ever known, nothing like he'd ever imagined. Evan's lips were still against his skin, pressing butterfly kisses in between moans and gasps that sounded like Zack's name. It felt like a lightning storm gathered between the points where their lower bodies touched, every movement of Evan's hand, every thrust of his hips making the pleasure spike a notch.

He let the pleasure carry him as though he was floating on it, feeling his muscles tense and tighten as the lightning sparked and flashed. Evan's thrusts became more urgent and erratic at the heat constricting around him. As the storm peaked, Zack's back arched off the bed, fingers gripping hard onto Evan's arms. Heat splashed across his belly, his chest, Evan continued to thrust for another moment, before the blonde's body tensed, pulsed, and an answering heat pooled deep inside him, an answering cry echoed around the room.

Then there was silence. Once Zack could hear past the heartbeat thundering like remuda hooves in his head, he could hear Evan's breathing, feel the reassuring thud of

the blonde's pulse as he held Zack close. Shutting his eyes, Zack lay his head against Evan's chest, too spent for words but needing to hear the answer anyway.

"Promise me...Promise me you're not gonna leave me."

"I promise." Evan kissed his hair, tucking Zack's head under his chin. "I'm not going anywhere."

*

Mornings began with the same old routines. The horses in the stables needed to be fed and cleaned out, before one was selected for the day in the saddle, checking on the others. Evan always chose the same one, a sweet-tempered grey mare than put up with having to follow her own nose when her rider wanted to moon over his lover instead of pay attention. Zack, however, never settled on one. Like a picky suitor, he rarely stuck with the same mount for more than two days running.

Hopefully, Evan's latest – and last, for a while at least – purchase would help fix that.

He watched as he saddled up the grey mare, as Zack peered around the stables trying to choose today's replacement for a horse that wasn't there anymore.

When Rafferty whinnied at his much-missed owner, Zack jerked up as though he'd been electrocuted. His stunned gaze, though, came to Evan first.

"How...I mean--?"

Evan smiled. "I'd have made a lousy trainer if I couldn't track down the horse I wanted, wouldn't I?"

In reality it had taken the best part of the last two months, ever since one morning when Zack had woke up, cuddled him, and confessed how much he missed his old horse. When Evan eventually found him, at a dude ranch two counties over, the new owners had fleeced him for twice what the nag was worth.

But it was worth every cent for that look on Zack's face as he walked over to him, leaning up to kiss him softly. "Thank you. I'm glad he's home."

Evan watched him with a smile as his young lover went to greet his old friend, thinking that it wasn't just Rafferty who'd come home.

END